

From Meal to Mission

J–Glenn Murray

When it comes to introductions, I remember that when I was young and charming and about to go off to Saint Joseph’s Prep in Philadelphia (where I was reared and raised), I was somewhat intimidated. I was so because I was about to take my place along with boys, many of whose fathers, uncles, cousins, and brothers had attended this school. For them the school was going to be familiar, for me most unfamiliar. Adding to my anxiety was the fact that I was also going to be one of 900 boys, only seven of whom were Black. I was a wreck and desperate to introduce myself wisely and well. In a conversation with my parents about proper introductions, one of my grandmothers happened upon the scene and offered some sage advice. She said, when it comes to introductions, when someone asks you who you are, **tell ‘em you’re a child of God.** That is the most important thing for each of you to remember about me, for it is the most important thing that you are to remember about yourself.

Like any child of God I have a social location. I am a Jesuit, that is, were I thrown into a school of sharks I would not be eaten—out of professional courtesy—sharks always recognizing one of their own. Seriously, I am a Jesuit, that is, a person of discernment, formed to be a man for others whose aim is always *cura personalis*. I am a liturgist. Or as one Brit in the 1800s put it, “a scourge sent by God where the church is not suffering active persecution so that no Catholic may be deprived of the privilege of suffering for the faith.” I believe that the late, great Paul VI had a better observation, “a liturgist is the rarest of idealists, wishing to bring about an encounter of our humankind with the living God.” I am a Black African-American. Beyond the bling and Ebonics, I belong to a people who are heirs to a world view that is characterized by the contemplative, the holistic, the joyful, and the communitarian. I belong to a people who have prized freedom and equality for all, as well as forgiveness and reconciliation. I belong to a people who are emotive as well as musical and finally, a people of the “Book,” lovers of sacred scripture. And the book tells us a great truth: there is a God somewhere. [Murray sings: *Over my head, I hear music in the air . . .*] Indeed, there is a God somewhere. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way:

[For] without [God] all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without [God], life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But with [God] we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. With [God] we are able to rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy. Saint Augustine was right—we were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in [God].¹

From Meal ...

This God who is somewhere, since time out of memory has been called by countless names, none more powerful than that which John the Evangelist uses: Love. John the Divine is unequivocal: “God is love” (1 John 4:8)—a love that is beyond all telling. Robert Barton points out how Isaiah the prophet centuries before put it poetically and prayerfully:

“Could a mother forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” [Isa 49:15]. Is there any love among animals or human beings, that is more powerful or passionate than that of a mother for her children? A mother jealously guards her young, violently defends them against attackers, and, if necessary, gives her life for them. Even this fierce and uncompromising love, Isaiah insinuates, is nothing compared to the compassion of God the mother of the cosmos.²

To this great truth our Jewish sisters and brothers would say *Dayenu*, or “It would be enough.” It would be enough for God to be love and love alone. But God’s love becomes incarnate, enfleshed in Jesus, “the coming-together for which we have longed since Eden, the embrace of God’s relentless love and our hope against hope.”³ Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, one like us in all things but sin.

He began to live as you and I begin, cradled within a woman for nine mysterious months. He opened his eyes as we open ours, except that his opened in a cheerless stable miles from home. He grew up much as we do: a child among children; a small segment of relatives and friends; little startling to report, except three days

¹Coretta Scott King, ed., *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1987), 64.

²Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 128.

³*Ibid.*, 159.

in Jerusalem on his own. He never married.... He made no waves till he was thirty.⁴

Then he was quite remarkable. “If you were hungry, he multiplied bread for you. If you were down on yourself, he lifted you up. If you were a sinner, you could count on him to share your supper. If you were a child, he gathered you in his arms and blessed you.”⁵ If you were in tears, he gave you reason to sing God a new song. But his living, a cause of joy for many, caused him no little trouble and a lot of enemies. He turned tradition around, censured cities, and warned the smug self-righteous about who would be first in the reign of God. “He warned the rich against their riches, assailed the powerful for abusing power”⁶ and called us all to repent and believe the Good News.

And for this, he who was innocent suffered an ignominious death. “One of his ... friends sold him for silver, betrayed him with a kiss.”⁷ His hands, which only touched in tenderness, were bound tight and tough. His naked back was whipped and his head crowned with thorns. “His enemies compelled him to carry his own cross, nailed him to it and let him die in frightful, lonely agony.”⁸ But God “highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2: 9-11). What wondrous love and more, for on the night before he died, he did not whine, weep, or wail at dinner with his friends, but took bread, blessed God, thanked God, and gave it to them saying, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” At the end of the meal, he took a cup of wine, blessed God, thanked God, and gave it to them saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” *Zikkaron, anamnesis!* What a command: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

And has ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human

⁴Walter J. Burghardt, “He Loved Me ...” in *Grace on Crutches: Homilies for Fellow Travelers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 65.

⁵Ibid., 65–66.

⁶Ibid., 66.

⁷Ibid., 66.

⁸Ibid., 66.

need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. [We] have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church.... And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei*—the holy common people of God.”⁹

The *this* that we do Sunday after Sunday, day after day, year after year—we call by many names: “Eucharist,” “The Lord’s Supper,” “The Breaking of the Bread,” “The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass,” “The Holy and Divine Liturgy,” “The Blessed Sacrament,” and “Holy Communion.” The *this*, says Walter Burghardt, is a mystery which makes us true disciples, informs us of what is truly of greater importance, and

shapes a community of Christ as nothing else can—neither letter nor law, neither catechism nor creed. [At Mass] the risen Christ is gloriously present as two or three of [us], two or three thousand of [us], gather together in his name. [At Eucharist] Christ himself speaks to [us] when the Old and New Testaments are proclaimed. [At the breaking of the bread] Christ rests on [our] hand and on [our] tongue, makes [each one’s] body a temple of God as truly as is the tabernacle. [At the holy and divine liturgy] Jesus says to us, “This is my body given for you.” Here is the Bread of Life—a food that paradoxically is not changed into us; we are changed into Christ. [At the holy sacrifice of the Mass] the recessional sends [us] back into the world to feed the hungry and slake the thirsty, to clothe the naked and welcome the stranger, to visit the lonely on a hospital bed or behind bars.¹⁰

The *this* that we do is fundamentally and paradigmatically in the mode of a meal. In a thoughtful and thought-provoking article by Jan Michael Joncas, we are challenged to remember that this meal, if not certainly a many splended thing, is an incredibly many leveled thing and has implications for us today that we would do well to examine and enact.¹¹

Jesus the anointed one of God did table-fellowship, shared supper with and dined with the common rabble. He replaced blood ties with mutual commitment to the reign of God (Mark 3:31–35, Matt 12:46–50, Lk

⁹Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 744.

¹⁰Walter J. Burghardt, “Sing a New Song ... With Your Lives,” in *Love is a Flame of the Lord: More Homilies on the Just Word* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 145.

¹¹Jan Michael Joncas, “Tasting the Kingdom of God: The Meal Ministry of Jesus and Its Implications for Contemporary Worship and Life,” *Worship*, 74/4 (July 2000): 329–364.

8:19–21). He dared to dine indiscriminately with any Jew, even those not of his crowd and caste (Mark 2:18, Matt 9:14, Luke 5:33–39, Luke 7:36–50, John 12:3, Luke 11:37–54, Luke 14:1–24, Matt 9:10–11, Luke 5:29–32, Luke 19:1–10, Matt 14:14–21, Mark 6:31–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–13, Matt 15:32–38, Mark 8:1–10) And if that were not enough, he ate audaciously with Gentile scum (Matt 8:5–13, Lk 7:1–10, John 4:46–53, Mark 7:24–30, Mt 15:21–28). And he encouraged women to violate the gender coded norms of proper dining (Luke 10:38–42).¹²

Again, let me quote someone who summarizes Jesus' table fellowship with power and passion; that is Nathan Mitchell, accomplished liturgist at the Center for Pastoral Liturgy at the University of Notre Dame:

He sat at table not as the charming, congenial, ringleted centerpiece of a Rembrandt painting, but as a vulnerable vagrant willing to share potluck with a household of strangers. Normally, a table's prime function is to establish social ranking and hierarchy (by what one eats, how one eats, with whom one eats). Normally, a meal is about social identification, status and power.... But the very *randomness* of Jesus' table habits challenged this system of social relations modeled on meal and manners.

It wasn't simply that Jesus ate with objectionable persons—outcasts and sinners—but that he ate with anyone, indiscriminately. Hence his reputation: He has no honor! He has no shame!... For Jesus, *healing* (the gift he brings to home) calls forth *hospitality* (those healed offer refreshment, food and drink, a place at the table).

The table companionship practiced by Jesus thus recreated the world, redrew all of society's maps and flow charts. Instead of symbolizing social rank and order, it blurred the distinctions between hosts and guests, need and plenty. Instead of reinforcing rules of etiquette, it subverted them, making the last first and the first last.¹³

Jesus broke bread with anybody, especially the nobodies. But he also ate alone with friends. On the night before he died, the indiscriminate One restricted the meal with his closest friends and disciples in a *chavurah* meal, a collegial meal at which there would be a discourse of some import. Whether this Last Supper was a Passover Seder or not, it was truly a feast with kindred spirits.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., 346–350.

¹³Nathan Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, Forum Essays 2 (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 89–90.

¹⁴Joncas, "Tasting the Kingdom of God," 351.

And even after rising from the dead, he continued to call his disciples to table. These meals, like that final meal, were not so much promiscuous as they were preferential.

Again, to go back to Mitchell:

...it is no longer plausible to think of Jesus and his earliest companions as a bunch of country bumpkins who couldn't tell a baked squash from a roast leg of lamb. They were well aware of the way meals function both within Jewish family life and within the larger context of hellenized Mediterranean culture. They understood the table's power to include and exclude, to create debts and obligations, to symbolize dominance and power. In short, they understood that to change dining habits was, quite literally, to change the world. For at table everything that creates the world is present: economics, politics, power, the potential for rivalry and competition, bonds among friends, boundaries against enemies.... Jesus' table ministry was, in fact, a strategy for rebuilding human community on principles radically different from those of his surrounding social and religious culture—different from the ideology of honor and shame, of patrons, clients and brokers, of "us" against "them."¹⁵

And we have found no better thing to do than this, *this*. But, as Mary Collins reminds us,

We forget who we are, where we came from, where we are headed. So we assemble when it is timely, to invest ourselves as a community of Christians in liturgical anamnesis. The self-engaging activity of our liturgy not only causes us to remember who we are; it invites us to commit ourselves to a life congruent with our identity.

All liturgy is anamnesis. Sunday Eucharist is the center of Christian anamnesis. This is the weekly occasion on which the baptized assemble to reconstitute themselves publicly in their identity as the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is reconstituting itself publicly, attempting to put on the mind of Christ... The Church is reconstituting itself as a priestly people when it prays the prayer of general intercession....

But the Church acts most profoundly in the Sunday assembly to reconstitute itself as the body of Christ. In Sunday Eucharistic liturgy we move through public praise and thanksgiving for the mystery; we remember, and remembering dare to move even nearer to our shared identification in the mystery of Christ. Through sacramental Communion in the Body broken for the world's life and blood poured out for the world's forgiveness, each of us engages ourselves, each of us commits ourselves, and the Church is reconstituted by God's gifts to us.

¹⁵Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, 78–79.

Our constitution as Church is always partial, never exhaustive. So we must reassemble every Lord's Day. We are burdened by the limit of our comprehension of inexhaustible mystery. We are also limited by the inauthenticity which comes from having divided identities, dual commitments to serve our own purposes as well as God's.¹⁶

Let me break it down and bring it on home. We assemble Sunday after Sunday to do the *this*, to do the *meal* for *mission*—or as Prioress Collins just put it, “to live a life congruent with our identity.”

... to Mission

Sunday after Sunday we gather, or more correctly we are gathered by the power of the Holy Spirit, for who else save Lady Wisdom could gather such a motley crew. And what a motley gathering we are at our dominical meal! Old and young, rich and struggling, women and men, sainted sinners—all gathered in the Spirit. No less than our ancestors in the faith do we gather in wonderful richness and baptismal unity. Our very act of assembling inserts us into a mission that transcends the individualism and privatism of our very self-absorbed culture. Even more demanding than our polite social conventions by which our culture signals hospitality, our gathering demands of us a presence: we are the Body of Christ broken and poured out for the world. The radical nature of Jesus' hospitality breaks into our eucharistic celebrations. Where else are we all addressed with the proclamation of a word we believe to be God's, not ours, and before which we all stand equal? Where else in our society are food and drink broken and poured out so that everybody shares and shares alike, and all are thereby divinized alike? Where else do economic czars and beggars get the same treatment? As the late Robert Hovda put it, “in the promised and challenging reign of God ... we are treated like we have never been treated anywhere else, ... we are bowed to and sprinkled and censed and kissed and touched” and treated like *somebody*.¹⁷ This is an alternative in contradiction, in sharp distinction, to our status quo. This classless society is the way things ought to be.

To celebrate this Sunday meal is, with Mary of Magdala, to cry before the tomb where the One whom we love was enslaved. It is, as one French

¹⁶Mary Collins, *Contemplative Participation: Sacrosanctum Concilium Twenty-Five Years Later* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 55–57.

¹⁷Robert Hovda, “The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers,” *Worship* 54/2 (March 1980), 105.

liturgist recalls, to go with the holy women, to search for the Lord in the crushing memory of his suffering and death. When we are burdened with family and community crises, torn by a divorce or an infidelity, troubled by someone's refusal to love, tired of rejection in the workplace, heavy of heart at the news of the illness of a dear friend, dejected by living daily with a terminal illness, terrorized by the deadly grip of violence and hatred, grieving the death of a loved one, we go again to the tomb. And at that tomb we hear the word that he is no longer there, and that we must seek the Living One not among the dead, for our God is a God of the living. To celebrate Sunday is to go again to the tomb and see the Risen Lord, maybe even without recognizing him: in the welcome embrace of the assembly, in the song of praise, in the clouds of incense, in the lavish sprinkling of water, in the story lovingly told and boldly broken open, in the bread broken and wine poured out, the very body and blood of Christ.

To celebrate Sunday is to raise our heads from sadness and proclaim with all our hearts that we have tasted and seen how good the Lord is, that we have seen the Lord—he is risen even as he said! Sunday after Sunday we sing. Why? Our sainted brother Augustine of North Africa exhorts:

Oh, what a happy *alleluia* there [in heaven], how carefree, how safe from all opposition, where nobody will be an enemy, no one cease to be a friend!

God [is] praised there, and God [is] praised here; here, though by the anxious, there by the carefree; here by those who are going to die, there by those who are going to live for ever; here in hope, there in hope realized; here on the way, there at home. So now, my dear brothers and sisters, let us sing, not to delight our leisure, but to ease our toil. In the way travelers are in the habit of singing; sing, but keep on walking. Ease your toil by singing, don't fall in love with laziness. Sing, and keep on walking.¹⁸

We sing at the meal that our mission may might be to “cheer somebody with a word or a song.” We sing hymns, psalms, and sacred songs not to get the presiding minister and enrobed entourage from A to B. We sing at the meal that our mission in this world of fragile dreams and broken promises may be to profess [Murray sings]:

My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation.

¹⁸St. Augustine, Sermon 256 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, Part III, vol. 7, *Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 170.

I hear the real though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?

Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear that music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?¹⁹

At the our weekly feast, we put on the mind of Christ. We hear a word that not only lifts us up and gets us through but sets forth a mandate to proclaim to all the world Good News: the good news that God creates from chaos. The God who, when in the beginning there was chaos abounding, stepped in and

flung the stars to the far most corners of the night ...
[set the] sun a-blazing in the heavens ...
[brought forth] fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds ...
[to] split the air with their wings.²⁰

The same great God, who toiled in the dust and blew into our nostrils the breath of life, still has the power to step in the tangled webs of chaos that may be our lives, our relationships, and certainly, our times. Somebody must need to hear that!

God provides. The faithful God of the trusting Abraham and his only son, Isaac, whom he loved; God who provided a ram for surrender instead of accepting a son for sacrifice still has the power to provide. God will see to it. More than laughter in the face of loss, God is able to provide us holy women who endure the lash of injustice and isolation that their children

¹⁹“My Life Flows On in Endless Song,” sta. 1 and 2, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), #763.

²⁰James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 20, 18–19.

might live. More than laughter in the face of certain death, God is able to provide holy men who withstand society's duplicity so that societal neglect might not prevail. God still longs to provide saints of all ages, colors, and hues willing to lay down their lives on the consuming altars of sacrificial love. Somebody needs to hear that!

God makes a way out of no way. The God who led a people from the mudpits of Pharaoh, dry-shod through the sea of despotism, who caused a people on a safer shore to pray psalms and dance victory, still parts the seas. The abused of every stripe, the addicted of every age, the asphyxiated, racially oppressed—all those who feel engulfed by hurt and harm need to know that the chariots of chilling manipulation and the charioteers of chiding control are about to be cast into an unrelenting sea. Somebody needs to hear that.

God's love is fierce! The Lord of hosts who espoused a people, secured the storm-tossed in an ark, and protected a populace in an arrayed city, still loves us with an unbalanced lover's love. And if that were not enough, this self-same God entices each and all of us to delight in the rich fare that is a love beyond memory, beyond control, beyond translation. Yes, beyond death itself.

The Good News is that God invites all—every man, woman, and child—to the feast without worry about money or price, for all God's children—rich or poor, festive or fetid, rooted or foot loose and fancy free—all are invited. Yes, the good news is that all are invited to savor the festival. While at the welcome table of plenty all are enjoined to sample the delicacy that is Lady Wisdom. In a world glutted with new technologies and ancient fallacies, there must be someone who longs for a word that is true and relationship that is right. Lady Wisdom leads the way. Good news indeed!

But hear this: God's wisdom leads us not willy-nilly but leads us to a new home, a new attitude. This, too, is great good news. It is not only the homeless hungry and the unjustly unemployed who seek a home. No, we, like the Hebrew children of old, like the shackled and enslaved on the Amistad, like the hopeful immigrants on that titanic ship of dreams, all long for safe shelter, harbor, and home. The good news held out for us through countless generations is that there is a God who still waits and wants and wills to provide such a haven, to sprinkle us again with refreshing water, and to place deep down in us a Spirit that excites and incites us to a love beyond all telling. Somebody must need to hear that, or it would not have been proclaimed in our hearing, ready to be fulfilled.

And here we come to the crux of the matter—all that has been promised—a God who creates from chaos, a God who provides, a God who makes a way out of no way, a God who loves fiercely, killing us softly with a song, who lays out a sumptuous feast, lets us taste wisdom, and imbues a new attitude of gratitude—these promises have been fulfilled in the fulness of time with the advent of our God who *eskenosen en hemin*. The mission is to tell somebody, 'cause nobody can get too much good news!

Having heard such excessively good news, what more can we do than say: “Lord, Lord, I know I ain’t what I’m supposed to be, but I thank you, Lord, I ain’t what I used to be!” *What a mighty God we serve!* We give thanks at the meal that we might always and everywhere give thanks:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:15).

We give thanks at the meal that the mission might be to provide others with a reason to give thanks. We do this so that the sexually abused may be lifted up and carried off from harm’s way. That those racked with pain may know comfort and care, laughter and love. That those in the grip of senility may know there is a listening ear and a helping hand. That those who battle AIDS may know a soothing balm for a blistering fever and a nonjudgmental shoulder to absorb inexorable tears.

We believers must tend to the homeless hungry and the unjustly unemployed. They must find in it in something beyond our society’s benign neglect. They must find it in our relentless concern and work on their behalf. The meal leads to such a mission.

Are you still with me, Church? We gather Sunday after Sunday to do the *this*. And at the zenith of our communal meal is communion. We share in a common loaf and a common cup. But this sharing is the most uncommon of experiences, for our sainted brother Augustine reminds us that this common sharing is communion with Christ in his Body *on* the table, no less than his Body *at* the table.

From all that has been said thus far, from all that we have said about Jesus’ table-fellowship, one would have to be almost invincibly ignorant to miss the intersection of meal and mission at this point. To be in communion with Christ *on* the table is to be in communion with Christ and his overarching and aching love of God and God’s unbounded reign. To be

in communion with Christ Jesus is to share in the very mission he was sent to inaugurate. St. Luke records:

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:17-19).

Jesus welcomed everyone to the table, saint and sinner alike. But he did not nor does he continue to invite us to stay the same. He invites us to transformation, to be on mission, to be broken and poured out for the life of the world. And we are!

In a simple conversation around the kitchen table or after a long class day, when a hardened, narrow-minded, blinded bigot might come to see that women and men, and Blacks and Whites, and Latinos, and Asians, and Native-Americans, and that faggot or that bitch are heirs to the one and same reign of God; that equal opportunity, housing, a warm bed, a nourishing meal, and safety are their birthright in God, then in that conversation the blind see, and the mission continues, and God is at work!

In a hospital room when a hollow-eyed, lesioned AIDS patient gains strength to cry not only in pain but in thanksgiving, then those who are far too often labeled lepers are cleansed. The mission continues and God is at work!

In a church parlor or counseling room when a husband and wife engaged in bloody warfare based on lame excuses and limp accusations might come to walk together toward a possible future of trust and sure-footed hope, then a dead marriage is raised to new life. The mission continues, and truly God is at work!

To be in communion with Christ on the table is to be in communion with the mission. But we are not simply in communion with Christ in eucharistic bread and eucharistic wine; we are in communion with the Body of Christ *at* the table. This, too, has implications for mission. St. Paul put it pungently:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10:16-17).

What would happen to our mission were we to remember that we are one? Our language of separation would have to end. I belong to the

ELCA; I belong to the Roman Catholic Church; to the Baptist Convention; to the Anglicans; to the high church choral Mass; to the low church, quiet, leave-me-alone-and-let-me-pray-to-Jesus Mass for the elderly; to the drop-dead mega-service; to the Gospel jump-and-shout, three-hour, leave-me-breathless Mass; traditional Mass; Pacific Rim Mass; Jazz Mass; Charismatic Mass. When our lives get so wedded to our own agenda and only one way of doing and being the Christian assembly, it is good to remember the Corinthians. They were shouting with reckless abandon: "I belong to Paul." "I belong to Apollos." "I belong to Peter." Paul's response: Absurd! Nonsense! "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" Or we might say today: "Were you baptized in the name of Luther or John Paul II?" *Megenito!* (1 Cor 1:12-13). Then he put forth this solemn plea:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose (1 Cor 1:10).

If our banqueting is true, if all are invited to the welcome table to be transformed, if we are in communion with the Body of Christ *at* the table, then we must take the first step in being truly present wherever dislike divides. Cynicism will not survive, sarcasm will not survive, fretting will not survive, conspiratorial carping will not survive, lack of access to each other's table will not survive. "Faith, hope, love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

In preparing for this talk, I reread *What Are the Ethical Implications of Worship* edited by Gordon Lathrop's. In that short monograph, I was forced again to ponder some words of wisdom from Sam Torvend:

Why does poverty continue to abound? Why do millions of children in North America and throughout the world suffer with hunger every day? Why do so many of the elderly, who live in a land of abundance, die of malnutrition each week, their statistics never reported in the press? Christians may ask the question this way: *Why does the eucharist's economy of equal sharing without discrimination not prevail in our society?...*

The ethical interpretation of the eucharist was clearer in the liturgical practice of the early church. Each communicant brought wine and bread to the Sunday liturgy. Deacons and deaconesses would collect this abundant offering, reserving a smaller portion for the eucharist and setting aside the rest. Immediately after the liturgy, the larger and remaining gifts were given to the poor, sent to orphans and widows, and carried to the sick. Without speaking a word, the church set forth the worldly implications of its holy eating and drinking....

What would happen ... if the normal protocols of socially-sanctioned eating and drinking (the strong eat, the weak starve) gave way in the churches to the promotion of shared eating without discrimination? Would Paul no longer need to cry out for justice at the table? Would Lazarus receive more than crumbs from the rich man's table?²¹

My dear friends, the mission continues. The sick still long for cure, the dead still yearn to be raised, the lepers still hope for cleansing, and God knows that legion is still the name of the demons among us. And I have not even spoken of our care for the heavens and the earth, fish and fowl, beasts and birds that split the air with their wings. All of creation was redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb, not just our bipedal human kind. Even your own praying at the weekly meal reminds you of that: "Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father: Endless is your mercy and eternal your reign. You have filled all creation with light and life; heaven and earth are full of your glory!"²²

Yes, the mission continues. And my momma didn't raise no fool; the mission will be at times a way of weariness, of exhaustion, of giving to the uttermost—but it is better to burn out than to rust out, for that is the way to happiness and the way to God. People are burning out every day, why not burn out for justice and righteousness? (Can I get an Amen?)

And God knows that ain't easy. Climbing the rough side of the mountain is an arduous task. Doing right—being patient, slow to anger, kind, compassionate, listening, attentive, forgiving, inclusive—is strenuous work. And God knows it. And what God knows, God does something about.

In days gone by when Elijah was world-weary, God—ever-faithful and true—sent him an angel, food, drink, and a command: "get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you!" (1 Kings 19:7). But here's the great news this day: when we get tired, God sends not just an angel, but the only-begotten Son, Jesus; not just any food and drink, but a Word to lift us up, a song to get us through, and the Bread of Life and Cup of Blessing.

Taste now the food of obedience, which keeps evil away.... Eat of me who am life, and live. For this is what I desire. Eat of life which never comes to an end. Eat my

²¹Samuel Torvend, *What Are the Ethical Implications of Worship*, ed. Gordon Lathrop, *Open Questions in Worship*, Volume 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 32–33.

²²Eucharistic Prayer 31, in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia, PA: Board of Publications, LCA, 1978), 89.

bread: for I am the life-giving grain of the wheat, and I am the bread of life. Drink the wine I have mingled for you; for I am the drought of immortality.²³

My sisters and brothers in Christ, do not let this moment pass. Meet weekly at the meal, so that you and all will know what Julianna of Norwich knew: With our God all is well, every manner of thing is well, and every manner of thing will be well.²⁴ Meet weekly at the meal, dine on word and sacrament. Be in communion with the Lord *on* and *at* table so that our singing might be true.

²³Attributed to St. Cyril of Alexandria. [Editor's note: Neither Father Murray nor I could locate the source for this quotation.]

²⁴Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 305.